

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius

A sermon preached by Father Bradford on the Fourth Sunday after The Epiphany

January 29, 2017

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Here is an interesting topic for Bible study: compare the giving of the law in the Ten Commandments with the Sermon on the Mount. Moses gave the *Decalogue* and it was to be followed completely. The Law would form the Hebrew people as God's Own people. From now on they would be identified as God's chosen people. Their observance of the Law would show them the way to the Promised Land.

Just as Moses had done, the Lord Jesus went up into a mountain. From other sources and occasions we know this provided Him with opportunity to be alone and pray. The next morning His disciples came to Him and that is when Jesus called out the Twelve to be apostles. Then Christ gave them (and *all* who had come up the mountain to hear Him) the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount is Almighty's God's analysis of the Christian character. And this analysis was presented in the same type of setting and circumstances as in the Old Covenant. His sermon gives the Law forming those gathered by Jesus into the new people of God. But in the New Covenant this was no longer a matter of *commands* of what you can do and cannot do. Rather, Christ gave us *Beatitudes*. The Beatitudes show what the Holy Ghost wishes to accomplish in us in this present life through grace.

Notice the words "and when He was set." It was time to teach. The time was ready for revealing the Divine analysis of the perfect character. This is no longer Moses giving God's Law to form the people of God *on earth*. Rather the Beatitudes reveal the Law of the *Kingdom of Heaven*, a law which has always been operative and which shall have no end. This Sermon on the Mount is both the most faithful portrait of Christ we possess, and also the most perfect model we can ever be given of the Christian character.

A key to all the Beatitudes is *suffering*. This suffering is not necessarily what we associate with agonizing pain, although it may include the sharp pang of suffering experienced in hunger, in mourning a loved one's death, in being persecuted or reviled. But *forbearance* and *restraint* are also a type of suffering. Forbearance and restraint are key ingredients in the heavenly virtues called *purity* and *mercy*. Becoming "poor in spirit", remaining pure in an impure world, and showing

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mercy, all require us to forgo, to give up, to relinquish. And the bottom line is *we efface ourselves*. In these ways we participate in the suffering of God. We are His faithful agents when we inject back into a selfish, hedonistic, and hungry creation nuggets of goodness for which that creation is starving even when it does not know it is starving! Living in a fallen but redeemed world always brings a price to pay for being God's faithful agents.

From years ago I remember a short story about forbearance. It is the story of a girl who grew up with her two sisters in a small southern town. They were reared by their mother who was a young widow. One night as a college student home on vacation, the girl ran a red light. Sure enough, she got stopped by the local policeman. In writing out the ticket he asked her name. Then he stopped writing, pushed back his cap with his pen, and gave the girl a long and thoughtful look. Putting his ticket book away, he said, "Guess we'd better have a cup of coffee and talk about this." So they went to the local diner, and over a cup of coffee and a slice of pie, they began to reminisce about the girl's mother. The cop had gone to high school with her and also knew the girl's father who had died young. The officer knew the sacrifices the young widow had made to raise and educate her three daughters. The family didn't need a \$30 traffic ticket. But more than that, the officer wanted this girl to understand why she was not getting the ticket. He wanted her to know just how highly the people in their small town thought of her mother.

The policeman was forbearing toward the girl who ran the red light, not for her sake but for the sake of her mother whom he knew and valued, whose struggle he partly understood, and with which he identified. The cop knew the children of this world can be ornery and hard to raise.

In the Beatitudes Our Lord Jesus is telling us to have that kind of forbearance, to not always write out the ticket. We are to suffer with Jesus, to show restraint, as He struggles to bring a new creation out of the old. Like the cop, we are to show this forbearance for the sake of the One Who we know and value, and whose struggle we partly understand. With the Lord we also know the children of this world can be ornery and hard to raise!

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In the Sermon on the Mount Our Lord says those who show this forbearance and bear this kind of suffering with Him will be blessed. And yes, the manifestation of Christian character in suffering forbearance makes our faith palatable and attractive to people disposed to think Christianity is insipid and uninteresting to their self-centered mindset.

Do not try to monitor your growth in holiness. But *do* re-read the Beatitudes often, and simply be faithful about your prayers and religious duties. Make an effort to put into practice what you believe. Do not worry about being successful. But do make the effort. Why? In the Sermon on the Mount you have the Blessed Lord's assurance that in this way you will increase in favor with God and man.